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〔論　文〕

Teaching and Learning Organically: Helping Students Produce Words and Ideas that Are Alive

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Abstract

Current practices in education favor a focus on the development of skills over humanistic qualities. In such a scenario, the teaching of foreign languages becomes compartmentalized, and students get the message that reading and writing –for example – are opposing disciplines. The author describes how a class can become involved in writing and reading stories by focusing on one aspect that many teachers tend to overlook: helping students convey personal experiences and find their own voices by using words that are meaningful to them because of their personal significance.

Key words: organic teaching, background knowledge, motivation

In conversations with colleagues, I find that there is usually an ongoing theme: We all want to find ways to help our students become more autonomous, assertive people who not only take personal responsibility for their learning but who also develop a voice with which to explore and express who they are. We hope that someday our students will realize that finding their own voices forms an integral part of their development as individuals. It is in that process of searching for voices that we can turn to words and ideas that are alive. It is only when words and ideas are alive – when they connect organically to the lives of students and teachers – that they can contribute to students' development. In this article, I first provide a rationale for this kind of teaching. I then step back and look at some ideas from the Renaissance and how Renaissance ideas about discovery and inspiration can apply to our classrooms and make our teaching more organic. Finally, I describe a writing-reading class in which students began to discover their voices.

As a teacher, I look for ways to provide my students with opportunities to find their voices by having them write and read their own stories. There are two reasons for this: First of all, every year, I continue to observe that many students are unable to make connections between what they learn at school and the world they live in. This is not entirely their fault. On one hand, school programs and parents expect these young people to acquire many skills, under the belief that a skill-based diet is the best way for them to secure employment once they leave school. On the other hand, many young adults feel that the difficulties they experience as they try to cope with their world have no place in the classroom.

Second, I have noticed that many students tend to write using similar patterns, and avoid

presenting personal opinions or ideas in their own words for fear that their writing will not be understood or will contain mistakes. This is partly the fault of textbooks that focus on formulas.

In my writing classes, I often find myself interacting with people who have many questions that are simply not addressed in textbooks. Some of their questions are about their upbringing, current events in their lives, and about their future. In short, many young adults want to understand some aspects of their life. Thinking in retrospect, I remember going through the same process as a young student. While some of us received the support of caring parents or teachers, others simply did not have such experiences and continued to harbor similar or perhaps more complex questions well into adulthood.

Current trends in foreign language education in Japan continue to favor the compartmentalization of skills. In such scenarios, reading and writing are taught as separate skills, thereby sending the message that the two are completely different activities. Neil Postman (1996), provides a detailed analysis of how compartmentalization has changed teaching practices to the point that much of what is called education today reflects the principles "associated with a market driven economy" (Postman, 1996, p.61). Postman contends that emphasis on the attainment of skills robs people of the experience of being active participants in the processes that take place in classrooms, where "diversity is a rich narrative" around which appreciation of individuals and their stories is at the core of learning (Postman, 1996, p.75).

When institutions and teaching practices downplay students' background knowledge and interpretation of the world, a powerful source of tangible education is wasted. In such classrooms, many young people believe that reading, writing, listening and speaking are subjects we learn "for tests," that they are not interconnected, and that they have no bearing on helping us form personal opinions. Sadly, many students and teachers still believe that interaction means responding to teachers' questions from the textbook and using words in ways that often result in "words with no emotional significance" (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p.44).

Teaching English as separate skills has a devastating effect in the language classroom: Students develop a sense of inadequacy not only in the four skills, but also in other important aspects of personal development such as recognizing individual interests and ability. According to Howard Gardner (1993), many young people fail at school, not because they lack ability but because schools fail to provide environments that recognize their talents. In his book *Multiple Intelligences: The theory in practice*, Gardner argues that, "the purpose of school should be to develop intelligences and to help people reach vocational and avocational goals that are appropriate to their particular spectrum of intelligences. People who are helped to do so, [I believe], feel more engaged and competent, and therefore more inclined to serve the society in a constructive way" (Gardner, 1993, p.9).

Encouraging students to write about their experiences opens the doors to a wealth of knowledge that recognizes what is important to them: issues of identity, development of relationships, fears, and future goals. I believe such knowledge can be combined with any existing syllabus as extensions to the activities suggested in books. Young people like to talk about themselves because there is an irreplaceable element of realism in their stories that no

textbook can reproduce. Thus, helping students tap into their personal experiences has the potential to motivate them to read with interest and write in a compelling manner.

The Renaissance is one of the most interesting and beautiful periods in world history: It is interesting because it gave human's confidence in our ability to solve problems. It is a beautiful period because it provided people with an awakening of the senses, and opened the doors for enquiry and unprecedented intellectual growth. One aspect of such awakening that is often overlooked is the fact that people began to realize that humans are capable of being spontaneous rather than conforming. It led people to see that stagnation and boredom are the common products of adherence to traditions and doctrines without ever questioning them. The awakening created by the Renaissance also nurtured an interest in traveling not only beyond the physical borders between countries, but also beyond the intellectual boundaries created by medieval thinking. In a nutshell, the Renaissance opened the doors for people to experience life organically: to study and learn about themselves as well as others, to see themselves as having the potential to learn new things, ask questions, experience and describe feelings, and look after their own intellectual and emotional growth.

The interest in the exploration and development of the potential inherent in the human mind is central to the writings of philosophers like Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), as well as in the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). These men believed in the importance of freeing the mind from limiting habits. Practicing this idea, da Vinci compiled a list of seven principles that – if attained and practiced – can help humans develop and maintain a sense of purpose in life. Among the seven da Vincian principles, two stand out for their pedagogical potential: Curiosity and Connecting. The first principle, curiosity or *Curiosita*, refers to the approach with which most children embrace life. For healthy children, being curious is a natural way to learn. They exhibit their curiosity through their incessant questioning about the world and its phenomena. On the other hand connecting or *Connessione*, refers to the act of bringing together seemingly unrelated facts or ideas. All this reminds us of the importance of learning to ask "what if" early in life, in order to be able to see ways in which connections, either between people, or between people and phenomena take place. In this way, these two da Vincian principles or attributes – as we would call them today – can play a powerful role in the development of our spirit and intellect (Gelb, 1998, p.9).

For his part, Marsilio Ficino, discussed the importance of developing curiosity by reminding us that, "He who still doubts has not yet learnt enough, yet we doubt as long as we live; and so as long as we live we should learn" (Ficino, 1996 p.77).

But what is the connection between all this and learning foreign languages? For one thing, the fact that Renaissance people saw their world as a place for discovery and artistic inspiration is one powerful reason to encourage students to experiment with more personal ways of using words. We don't have to be trapped by what textbooks tell us to do. Elliot Eisner (2002), for one, makes a strong argument in favor of bringing artistry into the classroom. He urges teachers to function artistically in the classroom by providing "a climate that welcomes exploration and risk-taking" (Eisner, 2002, p.162). Jerome Bruner (1996) supports the same idea by

reminding us that "education is risky, for it fuels the sense of possibility" (Bruner, 1996, p.42). Since the basis of Renaissance spirit was exploration, it may be useful to think of the classroom environment as a place where students are encouraged to take risks – to play with ideas and present stories and feelings in language that, as limited as it may seem, provides them with a vent to express who they are. Once the climate for exploration is set, there is no need for teachers to be too judgmental about the quality of students' work. Ashton-Warner reminds us that when we read a compelling text written by someone we know, we do not send it back because of its faulty grammar. Our focus is on the "content" (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p.88). As teachers, we can promote the development of curiosity through the practice of questioning, comparing, describing, noting distinctions and drawing connections. These are all characteristics common to organic processes.

In English we use the term organic in reference to natural growth and to development that takes place gradually over time. It is generally believed that such development is possible without the use of artificial additives. In my writing and reading classes, I like to use the term "organic" to describe the practice of producing texts that have personal significance to both writers and readers. By encouraging students to use words and ideas of their own, as well as by providing them with opportunities to express their understanding and mastery of English, I have observed that with each vignette they produce, a voice begins to emerge. The value here is that regardless of the level of acquisition, texts have that element of personality that makes us say to them, "this sounds just like you."

The practice of organic teaching is not new. In her classic book *Teacher* (1963), Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1912-1984) tells us that organic teaching has been around for at least two millennia. A novelist, musician, and an accomplished artist, Ashton-Warner embodied the Renaissance spirit, developing a student-centered approach based on the wish to find out what was important to her young students in New Zealand. By responding to their cultural background, she taught reading and writing to entire generations of Maori children using a simple method or "scheme" as she called it. Her method was straightforward: bring to life the words and expressions that had both, linguistic and cultural significance for her students. Once these words were brought to the fore, she would list them as "key vocabulary" that students could use as the basis for writing their own stories.

Ashton-Warner was a strong believer in the power of words, particularly when they represent the experiences of learners. Describing how her five-year-old students encountered words she wrote, "First words must have an intense meaning.... First words must be already part of a dynamic life" (1963, p.35). For her, successful learning begins when students realize the power of language: "Words having no emotional significance, no instinctive meaning, could be an imposition, doing [him] more harm than not teaching [him] at all" (1963, p.44). Years later, in a discussion on the basis for successful learning, Howard Gardner echoed her message by reminding us that "if one wants something to be attended to, mastered, and subsequently used, one must be sure to wrap it in a context that engages the emotions. Conversely, experiences devoid of emotional impact are likely to be weakly engaging and soon forgotten, leaving nary a mental representation

behind" (Gardner, 1999, p.79). All this points to one simple truth that one of my piano teachers often repeated: "The only way to know for sure that you have mastered something in art is when you feel it in your mind as your own. Whatever one plays on stage has to sound as if one is the composer. Teachers' ideas or other musicians' ideas won't do the trick."

In the spring of 2005 I was assigned to teach a third-year writing class at the Department of Contemporary Liberal Arts (Gendai Kyoyo Gakka). During the first semester we followed –quite dutifully– the assigned textbook, going over the readings and assignments, and tried to find connections between the assignments and the current themes in our lives. As with most textbooks, there were several instances where students struggled a great deal with what was expected of them. This was partly because of the topics included in the textbook, though carefully selected, gave my students very little room to comment on the readings, pose questions, or express opinions. As the semester progressed and they continued to turn in their assignments, I noticed that many of them were becoming obsessed with form. Gradually, fears about their pieces not having the right "shape," or about not writing "in the proper grammar," or about not meeting the word requirement began to gain dominance over the actual writing.

In general, in my classes I make it a point to have a short conversation with each student in order to keep track of whether the class makes sense to them. It was during those conversations last spring that I learned from several students how they felt; they were expected to write about events they had never experienced. Several students indicated that the themes in the textbook were either "too foreign" or simply irrelevant. For example, no one in the class had ever experienced being a member of an immigrant minority, that is, arriving in a foreign land with nothing, except for a mixture of dreams and fears, and having to adapt to cultures by themselves, just as the people in the book had done right after World War II. Yet, they were expected to write about the experience of being immigrants. That explained in part why at one point in mid-semester attendance began to suffer. Being a witness to such disparity led me to consider what would happen if we used the themes in the book, but directed the assignments to focus on the themes in our lives. I wondered what would happen if we combined the linguistic goals of the textbook while writing and reading our own stories.

Then, last October at the beginning of the current semester when I was drafting this paper, we spent some time talking about whether any progress had been made. I asked my students to have a short conversation with each other about our class, about the textbook, about our approach. As I listened to their conversations, it became clear that some of our assignments had to come from within. I remembered reading in Ashton-Warner's *Teacher* something about "reaching into the mind." That evening, I looked up the book and found the following lines: "The whole exercise of creative writing, the reaching back into the mind for something to say, nurtures the organic idea and exercises the inner eye; and it is this calling on the child's own resources that preserves and protracts a little longer his own true personality" (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 55).

In the following class, I went to the board and wrote the following sentences: "Each one of those present here has a story that is waiting to be told; each one of us has a story waiting to be

read by others." Then, we proceeded to write lists. We wrote lists because one of the most common things we do today is list-writing, from shopping lists to "never buy" lists. I reminded them of Sei Shonagon, a 10th century Japanese court lady who did a great deal of writing in the form of lists. After reading a few examples of lists from *The Pillow Book*, we proceeded to write our own lists. The themes that made our lists were very simple: things I hate, things I like, things I want, things I want to know. Things I fear, things I love, things I wish I could change, things I want to keep forever. On occasion, the themes of the lists touched on topics such as human traits, and that was fine. I don't know a single human who is completely satisfied with his or her set of parents or teachers. And so, we wrote a list for "qualities" in people we don't like, and another for qualities in people we admire.

Then we moved on to devising a project. The assigned textbook covers the stories of people at different stages in their lives, so it seemed logical to organize our project around the stories of my students' lives. We talked some more and decided to divide the project into four short sections: a) from zero to hiragana; b) elementary school; c) junior high and high school, and d) life as a university student. We set a goal of about 750 words for each section. I told them to begin anywhere they liked. I decided to give my students the freedom to find a point of entry. Experience has taught me that finding entry points is a difficult decision for teachers because students can either become engaged or turned off very quickly. Besides, since it is the story of their lives, it was best to let them make such decisions. I provided students with a copy of a template on which they could draw a bubble map and told them to begin by thinking about experiences that had been particularly meaningful to them. Then, I suggested thinking about a potential audience, someone in their future, like a daughter or a grandchild. Though they found this amusing, it struck a chord. After this, we focused on the technical part. Students developed a bubble map that included words about a particular event, the time, as well as words that would help them convey its significance. I spent the rest of the class visiting students at their desks, asking questions about the experience, suggesting to some to draw not only a map, but also a painting, and listening to others say, "I have nothing to say." My response in such cases is, "You are right. Maybe you have nothing to say at this moment, and that is a great first line. Let's look again at your lists." After talking some more, I give them one or two ideas about how to proceed. I do not tell them where to begin. That would create an imposition. What I would like them to experience is feeling the need to say something from within because it is important. After that, writing stories is –to some extent– a question of mechanics: drawing connections between the lists and the map, and organizing themes within the story.

The following week, some students brought their first drafts. At the beginning of the class, I asked them to share their drafts with other students and ask their partners to read, focusing on one aim: the story has to be "*Yomi-yasui*," that is, it has to be written in clear and personal language, easy to read from beginning to end. Good writing, as we know from successful stories and texts, has two characteristics: it is engaging and it flows. And that is precisely our goal. Some students chose to first write about university life, then, move backwards and that was fine. The goal was for them to find ways of creating connections between the different

periods in their lives – something not addressed in the textbook– and produce an aesthetically pleasing work they could show to someone important in their lives.

As I write this paper, it is now November, and we are still working on this project. Every week, students bring their stories, and ask their partners to read them and provide comments. In class, they use about fifty minutes to work on their drafts. Talking with each other about ways of conveying their messages is allowing them to become more comfortable with the process of drafting and writing from within. Meanwhile, I meet individually with students who request "conference time." These conferences are private meetings we conduct in one corner of the classroom. The student and I sit side by side and I ask her to read the story. I find this particularly meaningful because it is during these conferences that students hear themselves establishing the "tempo" that allows the "voice" in their stories to come to the fore.

There are times when the voice in text produced by a student sounds more like a newspaper report. While I do not discount the value of the text, I ask the student to think of a way to re-word the passage so that it conveys what she wants to say in her words, and not the ones suggested by an electronic dictionary. Then I provide support by presenting her with at least two other solutions in addition to the one she proposed. In this way, a student can go back to her desk with at least three or four possible ways of saying the same thing. This is something I learned as a young piano student. Each week, my piano teacher would give me a short piece of music, usually one page long, and ask me to play it in three different ways in the following lesson. At first, it was very difficult for my mind to conjure up other possibilities. Gradually, I learned to unlock ideas and develop different interpretations of the same text.

As the texts produced by my students keep coming in, I notice that they are beginning to write in ways that show individuality in their writing. They are noticing it too. Since they are expected to read and comment on each other's stories, the amount of writing has increased. Overall, this is having a positive effect on the group.

Like Renaissance people, students in my writing class are becoming aware that it is perfectly natural to take risks with their writing. It is my hope that by the end of the semester, the classroom will have become a marketplace where words are weaved into vivid narratives.

Creating and maintaining classrooms in which organic teaching and learning take place is not an impossible endeavor. Such classrooms are indeed possible, and they have been described in detail by Carl Rogers (1980). A strong believer in the potential for self-development, Rogers spent much of his professional career raising awareness of the importance of creating classrooms where student-centered learning takes place. He believed that people behave in a productive manner when there is an environment that encourages personal growth. For Rogers, such environments are places and situations where "a facilitative learning climate is provided." He added that such environments promote an atmosphere "of caring, and of understanding.... Learning from one another becomes as important as learning from books or films or community experiences" (Rogers, 1980, p. 300).

For their part, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner (1969) have described organic classrooms as inquiry environments. In such

classrooms, students and teachers work together, asking questions and finding solutions to problems. As a result, a classroom exists when "a series of human encounters" take place. The teacher is no longer a "transmitter of knowledge but a fellow inquirer" (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p.37).

Describing the relationship between motivation and classroom experiences Ushioda (1996), explains that learners who become accustomed to setting goals through short term projects and experience success at accomplishing them are likely to see changes in their view of themselves, their peers and their relationship with the subject of study. Ushioda has found that high levels of intrinsic motivation can be generated in classrooms where learners experience an evaluation system that offers plenty of teacher support, a concept she describes as "Evaluative Feedback" (p.24). This suggests that encouraging students to write their stories may be a powerful factor to create positive classroom experiences.

If we want to create such environments, it is of basic importance to pay attention to our students' uniqueness. This can be achieved by encouraging students to create and maintain dialogues among themselves as members of the classroom community, as well as with the teachers as the people who can help them find the connections and significance among the themes that construct the stories of their lives.

If the purpose of schools is to provide students with environments that are conducive to learning, then there is more reason for including organic teaching in our lessons. Drawing on the ongoing themes that make up the symphonies of our lives, whether related to our identity, or relationships may indeed make a world of difference for those students who view school as a boring place where nothing important happens. And if students discover something important about themselves in our classrooms, in addition to learning a little English, they will not have wasted their time.

Foreign language classrooms have the potential to become places where words become alive, as students learn various ways of representing the realities of their lives, and teachers guide them to recognize their potential and develop their talents. The language classroom can provide students with opportunities to write and read meaningful stories, and guide them to recognize that the investment they make in their own learning is a worthy endeavor.

I believe that this simple approach can create a basis for an organic way of teaching and learning that encourages exploration, makes important connections, and nurtures an appreciation of individuality. These are characteristics of organic processes. By providing students with various ways of bringing to life the experiences they know as their own, several things can be achieved. First, the topics will have more relevance, and motivation will be maintained. Second, a more personal use of vocabulary – the student's voice – will be internalized. Third, writing in words that are significant to the author will create real dialogues between individuals who come to know each other through their writing. When students read each other's work, they will experience that writing organically, from within, is an artistic process, and as with all artistic processes, it requires us to practice patience and appreciation for one another. Not bad qualities to learn these days. Such realization can be an eye-opening experience for both students and teachers, as their stories will tell us.

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